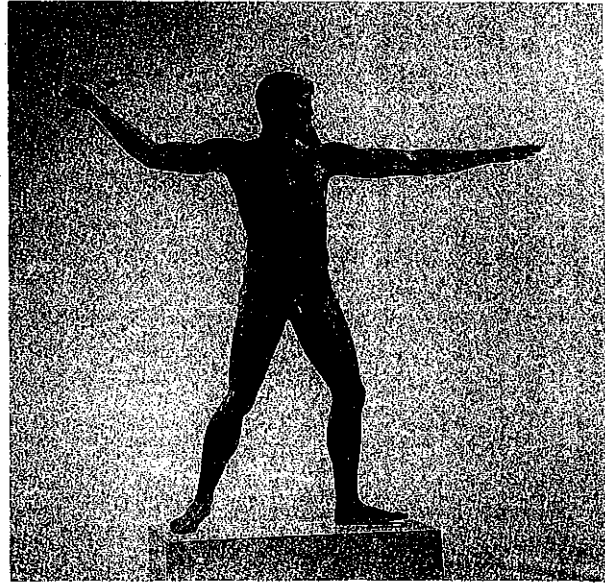


## Gods and Men



Life-size bronze statue of Zeus hurling a thunderbolt

When Dicaeopolis was about to start plowing, he first made a prayer to Demeter, goddess of grain. When he is about to take his family to Athens to the festival of Dionysus, god of wine, he first goes to the altar in the courtyard of his house and pours a libation (drink offering) to Zeus, father of gods and men. Religion permeated Greek life; prayer and offerings were daily obligations. Hesiod, the eighth-century poet, says:

Appease the immortal gods with libations and sacrifices, when you go to bed and when the holy light returns, that so they may have a kindly heart and spirit toward you, and you may buy other people's land and not have someone else buy yours. (*Works and Days*, 338-341).

The Greeks were polytheists (that is, they worshiped many gods), and their religion was an amalgam of many elements. For instance, when Greek speakers first entered Greece from the north about 2,000 B.C., they brought with them as their principal deity Zeus the Father (Ζεύς πατήρ = Latin *Jupiter*). The religion of the older inhabitants of Greece centered around a goddess, the Earth Mother, worshiped under various names, including Demeter. Eventually the various deities of different localities and different origins were united into the family of the twelve Olympian gods. They were called Olympian because they were thought to live on the top of the heavenly

mountain Olympus, and each god had his (or her) special sphere of influence. Zeus was lord of the thunderbolt and father of gods and men; Hera was his wife and the patron goddess of women; Athena was his daughter and the goddess of wisdom and crafts; Apollo was the god of light, prophecy, and healing; Artemis, his sister, was a virgin huntress and goddess of the moon; Poseidon, Zeus' brother, was god of the sea; Aphrodite was goddess of love; Hermes was the messenger of the gods and bringer of good luck; Hephaestus was the god of fire and smiths; Ares was the god of war; Dionysus was the god of wine; and Demeter was the goddess of grain (for the Greek names, see page xi). Besides the great Olympians, there were many lesser gods, such as Pan and the nymphs, and many foreign gods whose worship was introduced to Greece at various times and who joined the pantheon.

There were in Greek religion no church, no dogma, and no professional full-time priests. Temples were built as the homes of the deity to which they were dedicated; no services were held inside, and the altar at which offerings were made stood in the open outside the temple. The gods were worshiped with prayer and offerings, both privately by the family and publicly by the deme and state at regular festivals recurring throughout the year. The usual offering in private worship was a libation of wine poured over the altar or a pinch of incense burnt in the altar fire. Public ritual culminated in animal sacrifice by the priest of the cult, often on a large scale, followed by a public banquet.

The gods were conceived in human form, and human characteristics were attributed to them. They were immortal, all powerful, and arbitrary. They were primarily interested not in the behavior of humans toward each other (morality) but in the maintenance of the honors due to themselves, and in this respect they were demanding and jealous. If you gave the gods the honors and offerings that were their due, you could expect them to repay you with their help and protection. At the beginning of Homer's *Iliad*, Chryses, whose daughter the Greeks have captured and refuse to return for ransom, prays to Apollo:

Hearken to me, God of the Silver Bow, protector of Chryse and holy Cilla, mighty ruler of Tenedus, Smintheus, if ever I have built a temple pleasing to you, if ever I have burnt the rich thighs of a bull or a goat for you, fulfill now my prayers: may the Greeks pay for my tears through your arrows.

Chryses prays to Apollo by two of his cult titles (the meaning of the second, Smintheus, is not known for certain) and three of the centers of his worship (the gods were not omnipresent, and Apollo might be resident in any one of these places). Chryses reminds Apollo of past services and only then makes his request, that Apollo may punish the Greeks by striking them down with disease (Apollo's arrows brought sickness and death—since he was the god of healing, he was also the god who sent sickness). The prayer was answered, and the Greeks were struck by plague.